



# Managing your Mental Wellbeing

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**A**t a time of disaster and uncertainty, as we are currently experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic, most people will be emotionally affected, some to the extent that it affects their overall wellbeing.

This likelihood includes staff as well as patients. It is normal for doctors to feel stressed and is not a sign of weakness. Some doctors may feel a low-grade constant underlying anxiety; for others it can manifest as an acute stress disorder, some as a sense of hopelessness or even depression, and for some it may exacerbate a pre-existing or predisposing condition. Following are the top five tips on how to best help yourself and others through this time.

## 1. GET GOOD INFORMATION

One of the most important things we can do to help prevent and control stress is to get good information. As humans we are "hard wired" to be alert for possible threats to ourselves and others. Things are rarely as bad as portrayed in mainstream media, let alone social media, which tends to sensationalise issues. There are many reputable sources of information such as government websites, which distil scientific advice from the top experts in the country.

## 2. STAY CALM AND MEASURED

It is very easy in a crisis situation to panic. This results in difficulty coping, poor problem-solving and bad decision-making. Furthermore, panic can be infectious and result in the

total loss of control of what could have been a very well-managed situation.

As doctors, regardless of level, we are seen by patients, staff and the community as leaders in managing a health crisis. It is incumbent on us to step up and lead others. Leadership means staying calm and measured, making considered decisions, and showing respect, kindness and compassion to those around us.

## 3. STAY CONNECTED

A key strategy for staying mentally healthy during a crisis is to stay connected with colleagues, family and friends. The camaraderie, banter, chit-chat and general support of others is a key element to staying mentally well.

We are fortunate to live in a digital world that allows us to maintain a digital connectedness. We can talk with others by phone, Skype, Zoom, messenger, Viber, FaceTime, WhatsApp etc. There are a multitude of social apps which can be very useful if in quarantine. Make sure you talk with someone outside work at least once a day.

## 4. STAY HEALTHY – PRACTISE SELF-CARE

It is very easy when you are busy caring for patients, or worrying about others, to ignore your own health. First, you should maintain a normal regime, especially if in home quarantine. This includes waking at your usual time, having regular meals, cleaning your teeth and keeping your house tidy.



Second, stay physically well including getting a good night's sleep, exercising daily (at least having a 30-minute walk) and eating healthily. If in quarantine, you can download an exercise app or video.

Third, look after your mental health. There are lots of apps to help with relaxation, meditation and mindfulness e.g. Smiling Mind. Some good online resources are listed on the facing page.

## 5. HELP EACH OTHER

Remember everyone around you is feeling stressed. Doctors are taught from the first day of medical school not to show any signs of perceived weakness. We are masters at hiding our feelings. Sometimes it is those who appear the strongest, who fall the hardest.

It is therefore important to continually support and check on each other. If someone appears down, ask if they're okay. Alert a supervisor if you're concerned. It is very important for supervisors and health managers to look after the health of their team members and make sure they feel supported. No one needs to feel alone.

In summary these are difficult times – unprecedented in the past 100 years. Yet we know in six months, the worst will be over and life will return to normal fairly quickly – some things within weeks and some things within years.

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## SUPPORT SERVICES FOR WA HEALTH EMPLOYEES

**W**A Health services are collectively supporting staff during the COVID-19 pandemic with both physical and online resources. Staff have also been provided with access to additional support services such as psychologists, wellbeing programs and support groups along with existing employee assistance programs.

The Department of Health's **Healthy WA** COVID-19 webpage <https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/coronavirus> - includes a section on coping with mental health during the pandemic, with advice and links to other services.

**A dedicated WA Health Staff COVID-19 Call Centre is now open from 8am - 8pm, seven days a week: Freecall 1800 955 765**

In addition, there is a range of other support services available, including:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) – provides free, independent and confidential counselling services to assist with emotional, mental and general psychological wellbeing. For metropolitan area-based health services, the below organisations are available:
- Converge International: **1300 687 327 or 1300 687 633** [www.convergeinternational.com.au](http://www.convergeinternational.com.au).
- Lifeworks: **1300 361 008** [www.lifeworks.com](http://www.lifeworks.com).

EAP providers for WA Country Health Service differ from region to region.

- [www.lifeinmindaustralia.com.au](http://www.lifeinmindaustralia.com.au) – has a link to a range of resources for people affected by adverse events, like COVID-19
- [www.ruok.org.au](http://www.ruok.org.au) – is an excellent resource with advice on how to start a conversation with family, friends and colleagues about their mental health, with videos and links to further support
- [www.who.int](http://www.who.int) features a section with advice to health workers, including an article on *Mental Health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*.

Individual WA Health services have also established relevant, site-based initiatives for staff, including pastoral care services, regular updates using both written and audio-visual methods, live streaming interactive forums and drop-in sessions while maintaining a safe working environment and social distancing.

WA Health says it is acutely aware of the stresses placed on its junior medical workforce and is working to promote existing services available to medical staff including mentorship, peer support and Junior Medical Officer (JMO) wellbeing programs.

"We recognise peer support is critical; the Health Service Providers have developed strong networks of support for JMOs through to our consultant workforce," a WA Health spokesperson said. ■

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### Help is available

If you are feeling down or stressed, seek help. A cup of coffee with a concerned colleague may be enough. If not, there are plenty of people around who want to help you – within the public health sector, this includes staff in medical education and employee assistance programs. Outside your organisation, you can see a GP or psychologist. Other resources include:

- **The Doctors' Health Advisory Service of Western Australia (DHASWA)** which provides:
  - a website that details resources available to help stressed doctors [www.dhaswa.com.au](http://www.dhaswa.com.au);
  - a list of GPs and psychiatrists interested in treating doctors and medical students;
  - a 24/7 call advice line that any doctor or medical student can ring if they are feeling overwhelmed or simply want to talk to someone. The line is staffed by experienced GPs who will listen and provide advice on further action if needed. Call **(08) 9321 3098**.
- **Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24 / 7)** [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)
- **Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636; [www.beyondblue.org.au/the-factslooking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-factslooking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak)**
- **Head to Health: <https://headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support/covid-19/psychological-tips>** ■